



“OVER YOUR HEAD”

1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14



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It was the most perfect prayer I have ever heard. And it came out of the mouth of a six year-old. His mom told me about it after he said it. They were at the local swimming pool and the boy was standing at the deep end, toes curled over the edge... He stood there for what felt to her like a very long time, still unsure of himself in the water. Hesitating, meditating, heart pounding in his little chest. And just when it seemed like he was going to step back, away from the edge, he looked up at the sky, put his hands together, and said: "O Lord, give me skills or GIVE ME GILLS!" And he jumped.

Give me skills or give me gills. That covers all the bases, pretty much, doesn't it? O Lord, give me what I need to overcome what I'm facing; but if you won't do that, give me what I need to endure it. Give me skills or give me gills.

I love that little prayer, and it's surprising how often I have used it over the years. But maybe I shouldn't be so surprised. In his book *Hustling God*, Craig Barnes, president of Princeton Theological Seminary, wrote this about the Christian's life: "...your calling is not primarily to accomplish something, but to serve God who will always lead you to places where you are in way over your head." Barnes is reminding us that God has a habit of tossing us into the "deep end" of life. O Lord, give me skills or give me gills.

King Solomon was a product of the scandalous liaison between King David and Uriah's wife, Bathsheba; not a very promising beginning. Then he was raised in that hotbed of oriental intrigue and ostentation that was David's court, which was probably not terribly conducive to the development of sound moral character. He also spent his formative years under the thumb of his beautiful but conniving mother, who had browbeaten David on his deathbed into giving Solomon the throne in the first place. It is a wonder he turned out as well as he did.

In our reading this morning Solomon finds himself in way over his head. His father is dead. He is now head of the family. He's grieving. He's afraid. He's carrying a heavy load. No

longer swimming in the safety of the shallow end of his childhood, with one swift toss, Solomon is headed into the deep end of adulthood.

And what a deep end it was! Suddenly, Solomon has to be an adult -- a real grownup. But that's not all. It isn't just the loss of his father that Solomon is forced to confront. It's who his father was. His father was David, the great king of Israel, the slayer of giants, liberator from the Philistines, the original Raider of the Lost Ark, unifier of the tribes, master musician and wordsmith -- the "man after God's own heart." So with David's death, Solomon not only took his place at the head of his own family; he was now the head of the entire kingdom of Israel -- ready or not. And it was clear that Solomon was not ready.

But he should have been, right? I mean, Solomon had to know this day was coming. His whole life was a preparation for the day that he would become king. And yet when the day does come, Solomon seems kind of -- not prepared.

I think the author of our story is being kind to Solomon, writing, "Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places." That is some kind of caveat! The second half of that sentence certainly seems to bring into question the first half. Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, well, he didn't and he wasn't. We know this because shortly before his death, David calls Solomon to his bedside and tells him it won't be long until he becomes king.

David then gives his son some final words of advice. In 1 Kings 2:2-3 David says to Solomon, "I am going the way of all the earth. So be strong. Show yourself to be a man. ³ Do what the Lord your God tells you. Walk in His ways. Keep all His Laws and His Word, by what is written in the Law of Moses. Then you will do well in all that you do and in every place you go." He then tells him who to make allies, who to punish, and a bunch of other stuff; but making sacrifices and burning incense at the high places was definitely not on the list.

I think what the author is trying to tell us as gently as possible is that while Solomon may have tried to follow in his father's footsteps, it was clear that he was definitely not his father. He was, in plain language, a mess. He was in way over his head. Personally, I think I know how he felt.

The good thing, though -- the saving grace, if you will -- was that Solomon knew he wasn't ready. And he 'fessed up to it. An even better thing is that even when he forgets or intentionally abandons the way to God, God finds the way to Solomon. God finds him in Gibeon, where he has gone once again to make some more sacrifices and to burn some more incense, even though he knew better.

There may be a perfectly good reason why Solomon would be so devoted to worshipping in the high places; a reason that has nothing to do with his faith -- or lack thereof. You see -- and I totally get this -- Solomon buys himself some time. He procrastinates adulthood. I assume that offering 1000 burnt sacrifices is rather time-consuming. It could take days, maybe weeks. And as long as Solomon is up worshipping in the high places, he doesn't have to get around to the hard work and responsibility of being the king, or of following in his father's footsteps -- of being a grownup. He doesn't have to make the leap into the deep end of the great unknown. He can stay in the safe, shallow end of his life.

I did that pretty successfully for a long time. Drugs and alcohol enabled me to put off adulthood for 25 years, one day at a time -- tomorrow, tomorrow.... Some people stay in college for years -- the professional students. Some folks, like some of the agents I worked with in the insurance office, find their cubicle and never get out.

It's the perfect disguise, really. Way better than mine! His people saw what he was doing as an act of deep devotion, when, in reality, he was doing it all out of fear. It looks to all the kingdom that Solomon is constantly running to God for help, when it's really the opposite: he's constantly running away. But even Solomon can't run away from God. None of us can.

The Lord appears to Solomon in a dream and asks him what he wants. Because it's a dream and because there's no one else listening in or looking on, Solomon is able to unburden his heart to God.

⁶You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. ⁷And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. ⁸And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted.

Solomon was saying, in effect: *I'm not up to this, God. You put me in the place of my father, but I'm not my father. I have no idea what I'm doing, and I'm scared to death.* Then Solomon tells God what he wants:

⁹Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"

It's a prayer, really. O Lord, give me what I need to overcome what I'm facing; but if you won't do that, give me what I need to endure it. In other words, O Lord, give me skills or give me gills. And God gives Solomon both!

¹¹Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, ¹²I now do according to your word...¹³I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you.

The rest, as they say, is history. King Solomon is still known today for his wisdom. But unless you know the story of how Solomon acquired that wisdom, you might think he was born with it and that was that. We know differently. It was a gift, to be sure, but Solomon's real wisdom was that he didn't know anything about being king. And like the Scarecrow, or

the Cowardly Lion, or the Tin Man in Oz, when Solomon asked for wisdom, God said, "Sure!" but he had it the whole time.

If Barnes is right and God IS constantly leading us into places where we are in way over our heads, then this story about Solomon is an important one. It means we can relax. Or if not relax, then it means we can at least stop pretending that we have everything under control. It means we can stop wasting time and energy on our own high places, our own personal Gibeons, pretending to be something--or someone--we're not.

It means we might as well stop running away from God because God is going to find us anyway. It means that when we realize all that we can't do, we are in a perfect position to discover all that God can. It means that if we cannot avoid the challenge set before us, if we're headed into the deep end sooner or later, one way or another, we should ask God for what we need to overcome it or what we need to endure it. We should boldly pray for skills or for gills, confident that God will always give us one or the other.

And sometimes, like Solomon, we may even get both. But however the answer comes, God always comes with it. And that, as Solomon discovered that night in Gibeon, is the very best news of all.

Amen.